

QUEERMUSEUM

CONTEMPORARY ART IN BRAZIL HAS A HUGE PAST AHEAD

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Introduction

Queermuseum: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art is an exhibition that explores the expression of gender and difference in Brazilian art through a set of works spanning a period from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The exhibition brings together some two hundred and sixty four works, both from public and private collections, by eighty-five Brazilian artists from diverse artistic backgrounds, representing the aesthetical and generational diversity of artistic production in various parts of the country. This is the first-ever exhibition with an exclusively queer approach in Brazil, as well as the first of its scale in Latin America. From the organizers' viewpoint, the exhibition is a fictional and metaphorical 'temporary museum', wherein inclusion is exercised beyond the restrictive parameters of the artistic canon, usually exclusive and discretionary in nature. Works were chosen taking into account the aesthetical, cultural and historical aspects of the artistic object, as well as its material and conceptual reality, in order to highlight its contribution to the contemporary viewer. *Queermuseum* seeks to promote the 'decolonization' of the artistic form by moving towards an approach on gender expression and identity that leaves aside the notion of gender as a binary category. For the curator of the exhibition this exploratory character constitutes a non-traditional cartographic investigation aimed at intersecting a wide variety of artistic problems that concern the issues of gender and its diversity from a non-normative queer perspective.

The exhibition was organized by Gaudêncio Fidelis, a curator and art historian specializing in modern and contemporary art from Brazil and the Americas. It brings

¹ Description presented in the exhibition proposal submitted to the Brazilian Ministry of Culture (MinC) for sponsorship funding through the Cultural Promotion Law in Brazil (known as Rouanet Law). Available at www.cultura.gov.br (accessed on 2/1/2018).



'Queermuseum: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art', Brazil's largest queer art exhibition, Porto Alegre, 2017, Photo: Internet.

together works by such notable names as Adriana Varejão, Cândido Portinari, Fernando Baril, Hudinilson Jr., Lygia Clark, Leonilson and Yuri Firmesa. Among other works, the exhibition popularized a painting of a multi-armed Jesus Christ (the work *Crossing Jesus Christ with the God Shiva*, by Fernando Baril); images of children with the inscriptions *Transgender child lambada's transvestite* and *Queer child goddess of the waters*, by Bia Leite, and Adriana Varejão's *Interior Scene II*, which, according to the artist, 'is a compilation of existing sexual practices, some historical (such as the classic Chunga images of erotic Japanese popular art), others based on literary narratives or collected on trips across Brazil'.

The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue featuring a critical approach to its various aspects, such as its curatorial model and artworks, as well as discussions about the queer universe from an artistic perspective of gender and the expression of diversity and difference in our time.

The Episode

In accordance with the Culture Promotion Law, the Brazilian Ministry of Culture approved the general plan for the project, which allowed its organizers to raise a R\$ 800,000 sponsorship. Santander Bank hosted the exhibition as part of the programme of the Santander Cultural space, which has been fostering the visual arts, cinema, music and knowledge since 2001. The cultural centre has seen more than four million visitors over a twelve year period. *Queermuseum* opened on 16 August 2017 in Porto Alegre.

In the days following the opening, a wave of protest from conservative and religious groups took over social networks and received wide media coverage. Artists,



Bia Leite, 'Adriano Bafônica e Luiz França Shehá', 2013, Acrylic, oil and spray on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, Antônio Henrique Abinave Collection, Photo: Laura Fraiz, Courtesy the artist.

Bia Leite, 'Transvesti da lambada e deusa das águas', 2013, Acrylic, oil and spray on canvas 100 x 100 cm, Cláuder Diniz Collection, Photo: Laura Fraiz, Courtesy the artist.

² El País: 'Queermuseum: o dia que a intolerância pegou a exposição para Cristo'. Available at https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/09/11/politica/1505164425_555164.html (accessed on 3/3/2019).

³ BBC Brasil: 'Queermuseum', a exposição mais debatida e menos vista dos últimos tempos, reabre no Rio'. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45191250> (accessed on 12/3/2019).

⁴ Cf. *Rio Magazine*: 'Não vejo censura, diz dirigente do MBL sobre a mostra'. Available at <https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/rio-grande-do-sul/>

cultural institution managers, public managers, and the curator of *Queermuseum* himself, were taken by surprise and denounced such mobilization as a form of art censorship²: 'I've organized two Mercosul Biennials, but had never seen anything like this. The demonstrations were very organized and focused on some very specific works that do not represent the true scope of the exhibition. [These] groups showed hate in distorting their content, which is not offensive', said Gaudêncio Fidelis, curator of *Queermuseum*, at the time. 'Art is the best place for debate. I see this type of movement, with its intolerance of debate, as disturbing. These intolerant views are incompatible with art. They represent censorship', said Antonio Grassi, former president of the National Arts Foundation and former executive director of Inhotim Institute. 'They saw in the art milieu a chance to ignite a kind of cultural war, playing a moral card whose rhetoric of scandal is easily appealing, especially in the current social media ecosystem', commented Sérgio Bruno Martins, Professor at PUC – Rio³.

Conservative and religious groups, along with some sections of the population, condemned the works, claiming that their content was a direct apology of paedophilia and zoophilia, and an attack on certain religious symbols: 'I find nothing educational in a child seeing an adult or two adults fucking a kid, (...) we believe that (culture) must be promoted by the market and private entities. The State does not have the money to sponsor everything. In some Northeast states people don't even have sewage networks', said Paula Cassol, coordinator of Movimento Brasil Livre [Free Brazil Movement] in Rio Grande do Sul⁴. 'There were children looking

at this Christ-mocking “art”, wrote blogger Felipe Diehl⁵. ‘This is absurd! Leftists try to promote paedophilia and zoophilia among children and use public money to do it’, said Kim Kataguiiri, co-founder of Movimento Brasil Livre⁶.

Once the controversy was on the exhibition was officially (and prematurely) closed on 10 September. It did not last a month. Faced with the barrage of criticism, Santander issued an official statement clarifying its institutional objectives and recognizing that some of the works were disrespectful of certain beliefs and people: ‘Our role as a cultural institution is to promote the work of Brazilian curators and artists, and to generate reflection. To preserve authorial independence we never interfere with content, which has proved the most effective way to bring innovative and quality work to the public. This time, however, we became aware of the protests and understood that some of the works in the *Queermuseum* exhibition disrespect certain symbols, beliefs and people, which is not in line with our worldview. When art is not capable of generating positive inclusion and reflection it loses sight of its greater purpose, which is to elevate the human condition. The Santander Cultural does not endorse any particular type of art, but rather art in its plurality, based on the deep respect that we have for each individual. For this reason, we decided to

nao-vejo-censura-diz-coordenadora-do-mbl-sobre-fim-de-mostra/(accessed on 10/03/2019).

⁵ Cf. *Rio Magazine*: ‘Veja imagens da exposição cancelada pelo Santander, no RS’. Available at <https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/rio-grande-do-sul/veja-imagens-da-exposicao-cancelada-pelo-santander-no-rs/> (accessed on 13/03/2019).

⁶ *Capital Magazine*: ‘Queermuseu e o falso liberalismo de Kim Kataguiiri’. Available at <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/cultura/queermuseu-e-o-falso-liberalismo-de-kim-kataguiiri/> (accessed on 12/03/2019).

Queermuseu’s curator Gaudencio Fidelis during a protest in Porto Alegre, 2017, Photo: Itamar Aguiar, VEJA Agency, São Paulo.



⁷ Santander Cultural (posted on their social account on Facebook): 'Nota sobre a exposição Queermuseu'. Posted on 10/09/2019: <https://www.facebook.com/SantanderCultural/posts/nota-sobre-a-exposiçao-queermuseunos-ultimos-dias-recebemos-diversas-manifestaçã/732513686954201/> (accessed on 13/03/2019).

⁸ Federal Public Prosecutor. Available at <http://www.mpf.mp.br/rs/sala-de-imprensa/docs/recomendacoes/2017/recomendacao-queermuseu-porto-alegre/view> (accessed on 12/3/2019).

close the exhibition on Sunday, 10 September. However, we remain committed to promoting the debate on diversity and other major contemporary issues⁷.

Following an investigation the Federal Public Prosecutor (MPF) concluded that the works did not incite to crime, and instructed Santander Cultural to reopen the exhibition immediately in Porto Alegre, in addition to organizing new exhibitions with diversity as the main theme. A note emphasized that '(...) according to the Rio Grande do Sul Public Prosecutor's office, the most attacked artworks on social media do not make any reference to, nor encourage the practice of, paedophilia. The rights of children and young people visiting the exhibition have not been harmed⁸. While it is true that works of art are the reflection of their time, including its contradictions, this episode uncovered the image of a conservative and authoritarian society. It also generated the possibility of a discussion on the micro politics of art (market, public sphere, taboos, etc) and the limitations of this field in contemporary Brazilian society.

Cartography of Difference

This episode has several nuances, and the proposal to bring together works that formed a cartography of difference was accurate in foretelling the events that followed the opening to the public. Cartography, as a research route (increasingly used in the field of the arts) privileges an emphasis on process over the achievement of goals defined a priori. In a cartography nothing is given; it is made of instabilities. By questioning the Cartesian-representational character of a phenomenon, it anchors itself in the recognition of the multiplicity of intersections that affect it.

Population protest in front of Santander Cultural at Porto Alegre, 2017, Photo: Isadora Neumann, RBS Agency, Porto Alegre.



As proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987): 'Multiplicities are reality itself, and do not suppose any unity, do not enter any totality, nor do they refer to a subject. Subjectivations, totalizations, unifications are, on the contrary, processes that are produced and appear in multiplicities'.

In analogy to processes that forge a vision of the body according to a pattern based on difference and multiplicity, as opposed to the normative standard currently accepted in the culture of modern western societies, particularly in the context of Latin American countries (the native territory of all the featured artists), a cartography of the effects generated by the exhibition unveils the connections, articulations, and prismatic reflections of how difference is perceived in contemporary Brazilian society, especially when diversity is expressed in relation to body and sex. It also shows the variations that this triggers. Cartography attempts to make explicit 'the network of forces to which the object or phenomenon is connected, giving account of its modulations and its permanent movement' (Barros et al, 2012, 57). By choosing the procedure over the outcome of the critical effort to represent an object or phenomenon in itself, the underlying message was that what is to be made explicit cannot be grasped as a conclusive set of considerations. Instead, it reinforces the primacy of the subjectivities' dynamics and the non-categorical character of the underlying processes that determined the phenomenon/object under analysis: 'for this reason, cartography defends the maintenance of a flexible positioning and open thinking beyond everything that may emerge in the context of problematization in which the object under study is situated' (Souza et al, 2016, p. 813).

In light of this, it is interesting to keep in mind the anticipatory character that the exhibition materialized, even if by analogy, in the totality of the works that it put together. What happened in the social realm following its opening is the effect of a different set of meanings, which it unlocked, and which were already latent in that society at that moment; it is these nuances, their paradoxes, and the conservative character of society, in collision with the open and flexible proposal of *Queermuseum*, which have exposed a society that stands against the freedom of expression and possibilities for dialogue that are characteristic of art.

To begin with, the censorship imposed on the exhibition revealed the power of social media mobilization, along with the disinformation of the general population and the programmatic fragility of cultural institutions more interested in guaranteeing returns on their marketing investments (achievable by promoting culture) than in actually fostering the cultural sector, as well their inability to deal with the subject (as shown in press releases). It became clear that, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, sex, sexual diversity and gender are still major taboos in Brazilian society. Moreover, the significance of having gathered the works of major modern and contemporary Brazilian artists, such as Alfredo Volpi, Candido Portinari, Clóvis Graciano and Lygia Clark was utterly disregarded. That conservative society aimed their weapons at a very small set of artworks which, despite not representing the spirit of the entire exhibition, pointed to what these good people did not want to

recognize: a cultural, sexual and political reality that differs from the standards they consider acceptable.

The strategy of questioning binary categories, even those supposed to cover diversity propositions, is central to a queer approach; that is where its strength lies: in doubting pre-established categories. Aiming at the construction of a wide questioning of the heteronormative, the exhibition proposed an open dialogue between art and society. Strangeness is the typical effect of such artistic proposals, which provoke a rethinking of historically marked categories. This is indeed the objective: 'In the cultural and artistic context, both the queer and the gender perspectives are making tensions in the way of producing knowledge in areas such as art history, as well as in the criteria for the elaboration of curatorship. Aesthetically, the way the exhibitions operate can change the thinking and self-image, both in audiences and artists, during the artistic process and (re) invention of self. The gay, the lesbian, the woman, the trans, the queer, the stranger, or the unidentified, propose themselves as affections, survive in streams of constant intervention in art' (Blanca, 2017, 105). In the course of this episode, some of the most commented artworks were *Crossing Jesus Christ with the God Shiva*, by Fernando Baril and *The Weight of Things*, by Sandro Ka, both promoting the encounter of the sacred and the profane. In a conservative society like Brazil, the largest Catholic nation in the world, (65% Catholics and 22% Evangelicals, according to the 2010 IBGE Census), this dialogue is obviously impossible. Some other works brought similar provocations, questioning the sacred and profane binomial, but those were the ones that received the most criticism from the religious groups active in social media. Works not dealing with Christian iconography, such as those focusing on African imagery, were not targeted. Indeed, the proposal to discuss the binomial 'things of the spirit' versus 'physical things' found no space in that context. Bia Leite's works *Adriano Bafônica* and *Luiz França She-ra, Transgender child lambada's transvestite* and *Queer child goddess of the waters* were the most circulated and commented images in the context of hysteria. They proposed a deconstruction of the taboos around the idea that sexual diversity may present itself even in childhood, calling for a frank and open discussion of the topic. Instead, the works were seen as promoting pornography and paedophilia, which spoke of a clear preference for obscurantism rather than information.

Beyond Simone de Beauvoir's widely accepted idea that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, Judith Butler (2003, 37) – who was also harassed during a visit to Brazil in November of the same year *Queermuseum* was opened/cancelled⁹ – questions the cultural mechanism of gender construction: 'What underlies the presupposition that there are identities identical to themselves, persistent over time, unified and internally coherent?'. For her, 'Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently postponed, never fully displayed in any given conjuncture. An open coalition, therefore, would affirm identities alternately instituted and abandoned, according to the proposals in progress; it will be an assembly that allows multiple convergences and divergences, without obeying a normative and definitive *telos*'. (Idem)

These formulations never had the opportunity to come to light, even in the content of the exhibition's Educative Programme.

Finally, the most repudiated work in *Queermuseum* was the one that most openly proposed the debate about the triad of pleasure, sex and culture; *Interior Scene II*, by prestigious Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, elicited the fiercest comments from those who saw in it nothing but immorality. As mentioned above, the work is a compilation of sexual practices, some historical, others based on literary narratives or collected in the artist's travels around the country. Maybe the opposition between a 'quiet life' and the 'vitality of the sexual scenes' depicted in Varejão's work was her intended mockery, but the only argument against it was that it featured a couple having sex with an animal, which therefore qualified it as 'degenerate art', to be persecuted and eliminated. Any similarity to Hitler's Nazi Germany is not a mere coincidence.

⁹ *Diário de Pernambuco*: 'Filósofa Judith Butler é recebida no Brasil sob gritos de 'bruxa', protestos e bonecos queimados'. Available at http://www.diariodepernambuco.com.br/app/noticia/viver/2017/11/07/internas_viver,729978/filosofa-judith-butler-e-recebida-no-brasil-sob-gritos-de-bruxa-pro.shtml (accessed on 27/03/2019).



Fernando Baril, 'Cruzando Jesus Cristo com Deusa Shiva', 1996, Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 125 cm, Artist Collection, Photo: F. Zago, Studio Z, Courtesy the artist.

This paper does not intend to make an extensive commentary on the aesthetics and the possible purposes of the works shown in *Queermuseum*, mainly because there are more than two hundred of them. Moreover, it is also not in our central interest to reconstruct a historically informed argument about the reasons why certain issues still remain taboos in societies, especially in those moments of greater conservative backlash, as in the Brazilian experience of recent years, because much has already been written and because the relevance of this topic is perhaps no longer of interest to anyone, despite the validity of our findings.

About forty years ago (1980), in a work that became seminal in the country, Brazilian anthropologist José Carlos Rodrigues had already discussed aspects of the social construction of the body and how it is located in different societies and human cultures. For Rodrigues, the challenge is to show how the social dimension is the one that appropriates the body, so that the presumption of an 'increasingly physiological physiology', as well as that of an 'increasingly anatomical anatomy' becomes, for modern man, and in the face of hegemonic scientism, a kind of naturalization of what is in reality relational and symbolic (Rodrigues, 2006, 116). And yet the debate remains impossible to establish in more critical, open, and non-obscurantist terms. In this episode it is even more interesting to notice the role of art as an agent of discomfort, or of the artist / curator as a provocateur of reactions that otherwise remain hidden in the social and even artistic context. It has never been the role of art to pacify modes of understanding or to shape behaviours, but to provoke, to cause strangeness to instigate sensations and thoughts, and perhaps to open up possibilities for social debate. In this sense, among the many effects of *Queermuseum* is the ability to evoke a fruitful debate in the context of art itself (and beyond). Some of the various analytical explanations generated by the episode turned the prolific formulation of *Queermuseum* into an umbrella that would cover something larger, whose focus was indeed the provocative potential of art. Taking a step forward from this initial contradiction, we must pay particular attention to the curatorial strategy of this 'cultural enterprise' that takes queer history and imagery as a 'great umbrella' under which 'advanced knowledge about artistic production will be produced by deviation of the canonical norm'. The queer is 'instrumentalized' to 'subvert the consolidation of an essentialist identity politics as it allows for the deconstruction of gender barriers without imposing others', where it simultaneously focus on debates about sexuality and difference. The queer umbrella is armed to select some of its 'aspects' which, taken as conceptual, are 'instrumentalized' to think of art, its history and curatorial practice: 'Queer is therefore a gateway, a device, a conflict generator, evidence from which this exhibition was generated to build a platform for critical investigation of the formation of meaning through exhibitions' (Diniz, 2018, 241).

Given the total impossibility of establishing any dialogue about what was causing such strangeness, it seems to us reasonable that the biggest legacy of the exhibition is the debate around art and its possibilities. The curator himself designated the exhibition as a 'museum of detour', a curatorial platform to take a diversity

led approach. For Gaudêncio Fidelis, the exhibitions that generate challenging situations or call for the rethinking of the canon of art history are still few and far between. Which is why, from our point of view, *Queermuseum* served to open up a path that will hopefully be further consolidated in the country.

Final Considerations

This paper focused on the innovative artistic proposal of the exhibition *Queermuseum: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art* and the effects it had on a conservative society. A section of the public received it with disgust and immediately rejected it; the two camps defended something that seemed indefensible to the other; between them stood a cultural institution committed to a programmatic project whose social function limits were exposed by the context. This last aspect seems especially relevant to us, precisely due to the institutional characteristics it incorporates.

While here we have not presented all arguments concerning the aesthetical or technical aspects of the curator's artistic choices, that does not mean they did not exist. Instead they were not as prominent as the political aspects that are the object of this analysis. Even regarding the political aspects, a host of other issues were not addressed here, such as the supposed lost opportunity for deepening the debate about the queer context in the country and in Latin America¹⁰, or its setting in less 'mercantile' terms. In the curator's words (Amorim, 2019), the group that had the most difficulty in understanding the exhibition's proposal was that of art critics. Questioned about the lack of representativeness of queer artists in the exhibition, Fidelis defends himself by stating that the exhibition could not falsify a reality that actually does not exist and that *Queermuseum's* goal was never to be an inclusive exhibition. These and dozens of other aspects of *Queermuseum* are still to be addressed, as it remains an excellent exemplar for social, cultural, political and artistic analysis.

The role played by Santander Cultural, as a cultural institution whose mission is to endow the arts and knowledge, in no way corresponded to their own discourse. Not only in Brazil, but also throughout the world, transnational corporations have used the promotion of the arts as an institutional marketing strategy. In Brazil, the Culture Promotion Law deployed around R\$ 50 billion between 1993 (when it was passed) and 2018. This mechanism is, in fact, misappropriated by business interests, which use the State's tax waiver to promote the reputation of private companies, almost always privileging large-scale prestigious artistic proposals and betting little on experimental expressions or on those with potential for development of the cultural field in the country. The surprise of having the *Queermuseum* promoted by Santander, through the Incentive Law mechanism, opened an excep-

¹⁰ See for example: 'Falta Queer em Queermuseum', available at <http://revistacaju.com.br/2018/08/19/falta-queer-em-queermuseum/> (accessed on 11/24/2019) and 'Queermuseum Parque Lage 2018: você sabe o que significa queer?', available at <https://coletivoseusputos.wordpress.com> (accessed on 11/24/2019).



Flávio Cerqueira, 'Amnesia', 2015,
Latex on bronze, 137 x 30 x 26
cm, Edição de 5, Artist Collection,
Courtesy the Casa Triângulo Gallerie,
Photo: Rômulo Fialdini, Courtesy the
artist and Casa Triângulo Gallerie,
São Paulo.

tion that was never again to occur, since the company gave in to conservative claims so as to benefit its own image.

Brought by the increase in private investment in culture, the expansion of the cultural offer experienced across the world has no validity when this type of strategy is adopted, and such has invariably been the programmatic line of these cultural spaces. It is up to us, managers, artists, curators and other specialists to challenge a type of promotion that fosters neither a democratic and plural culture nor the arts as a space for experimentation and symbolic representation, but is used to promote the brands, goods and services of the companies themselves and, in some cases, is funded by public resources that should be invested in the plurality of expressions within the culture.

Finally, it is very likely that the institutional response to which we are referring is a reflection of the political strategy of the current times. The conservatism of the present moment promotes a certain policy of adaptation to the model rather than questioning the naturalization of what is not natural. The postmodern man wants mirrors while this type of art delivers magnifying glasses; perhaps that is the cause of the objections to it. What is certain is that, at least concerning this episode, the artists aligned themselves with the purpose of an art exonerated to fit into the societal patterns from which they departed.

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